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SUBJECT: THE ISLAMIC FACTOR IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Expanding Russia's ties with the Islamic world has been a priority for Putin and an important factor in his efforts to revitalize Russian foreign policy. The GOR has increased bilateral diplomacy with Muslim states, ratcheted up involvement in the Middle East peace process (MEPP) and fora such as the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC), and strengthened its public diplomacy. The payoffs for Russia have been an enhanced diplomatic role in the Middle East and Asia with attendant opportunities for trade and investment. GOR outreach to the Muslim world has also helped make Russia more secure by limiting foreign support for Chechen separatists and possibly by deflecting Islamic extremists who have not targeted Russia as they have the U.S. and Europe. Finally, GOR efforts may have struck a positive chord with the country's large Muslim minority, although most working level MFA officials and experts discount the role and importance of Russia's Muslim population in the GOR's foreign policy calculations. End summary.

Russia's Islamic Offensive

[1](#)2. (C) Russia initiated a diplomatic offensive under Putin to improve relations with the Islamic world, a goal that has factored into numerous foreign policy decisions, including the GOR's active role in the MEPP, its relations with "rogue states" such as Iran and Syria, and diplomacy toward far flung Muslim countries from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia. Russia's Islamic offensive marked a significant aspect of the reorientation of Russian foreign policy under Putin, who sought to reassert Russia's international role by moving away from what many Russians consider the "discredited" Western orientation of Russian policy in the 1990s and restoring the nation's "global reach." Russia seized an opportunity in the tarnished U.S. image among Muslims as a result of the "War on Terror" and invasion of Iraq. Although Russia shared the U.S. goal of defeating terrorism and securing Afghanistan, GOR opposition to Iraq and its more conciliatory approach to settling the Iranian nuclear issue allowed Russia to present itself as a partner to Muslim states and counterbalance to the U.S.

[1](#)3. (C) Russia also highlighted its considerable Muslim population to underscore a "natural and special relationship" with the Muslim world. Russia's significant Muslim minority, estimated at 15 percent, or 21 million of its 142 million

people, allows the GOR to play up Russia's "special status" as a multi-denominational country located somewhere between the West and Islam. The GOR seeks to straddle the Christian and Muslim worlds much the way it positions itself a Eurasian power balancing the West and the East. Russia is attempting to play the role of "bridge" or "mediator" in international affairs, including in the MEPP where it maintained communications with Hamas while other countries isolated the Palestinian faction, and used its relationship with Damascus to ensure Syria's participation in the Annapolis summit (ref A).

¶4. (C) Russia saw its claim to be a multi-denominational country vindicated when it was granted observer status in the OIC in 2005. The GOR was also able to convince the Saudis to increase significantly the annual quota for Russian pilgrims to Mecca (possibly by inflating the true number of Russian Muslims), thereby enhancing the Russian presence in the Middle East and satisfying Russia's Muslim leadership. Domestically, GOR efforts helped convince Muslim leaders to back Putin politically, but also emboldened Muslims whose increasing use of "Muslim Russia" alarmed non-Muslims and may have contributed to a nationalist backlash against Muslims' increased public profile.

A Dialogue, Not a Clash of Civilizations

¶5. (C) Russia's Islamic offensive has been a mix of official diplomatic efforts and quasi-official public diplomacy. In a January address to Muslim diplomats, Foreign Minister Lavrov highlighted recent Russian diplomacy by citing Putin's 2007 trips to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE, and Indonesia as evidence of the "close interaction" between Russia and Islamic states. "There are no political, ideological or other controversies in our relations," said Lavrov, who also spoke of Russia and the Islamic world as "partners" fighting terrorism and settling regional crises. Also in January, the current Chairman of the Russian Mufti Council, Sheik Ravil Gaynutdin, went to Malaysia to meet Prime Minister Badawi and told an international conference on Islamic civilization that Malaysian society presented an example for Russian Muslims how to combine modernization with Islam while rejecting extremism.

¶6. (C) Russian public diplomacy uses a variety of tools to reach the Muslim world, including cable TV channel Russia Today's Arabic service begun in 2005. Moscow also established the Russia-Muslim World Strategic Vision Group in 2006 to bring together representatives of Russia and Islamic nations. Although the first meeting was held with great fanfare under former Prime Minister Yevginy Primakov, participants complained that the organization was just another talking shop and the initiative appears to have "fizzled out," according to RIA Novosti political commentator Marianna Belenkaya, who told us that Russia's Islamic offensive produced real results in the realm of politics and trade but little when it came to settling the "clash of civilizations."

¶7. (C) The "Dialogue of Civilizations" (DOC) has been a more lasting effort to promote ties with Muslims, thanks in part to the salutary impact on the business interests of its founder, Russian Railways President Vladimir Yakunin. Established in 2002 as a Russian answer to Davos that offers an "alternative model of globalization" and promotes dialogue, this ostensible NGO is tied to the Kremlin through Yakunin, a close friend of Putin who was considered for a time a possible presidential successor. Offering a variety of programs, the DOC remains focused on providing Russian officials a platform to further relations with the Muslim world by holding seminars and presenting awards to figures such as former Iranian President Khatami and Jordanian King Abdullah. Yakunin most recently led a large Russian delegation to Bahrain in January for a conference on religious dialogue. He was accompanied by Deputy Foreign Minister Saltanov, who used the opportunity to promote the GOR's idea for a security and cooperation organization in the

Persian Gulf (ref B).

Russia's Gain: Political and Economic Ties

¶8. (C) Putin's historic trips to Muslim states, followed by other GOR officials' visits, were reciprocated by representatives of Muslim states, ranging from Saudi princes to Bangladeshi ministers and Lebanese parliamentarians, who have become a regular presence in Moscow. The real payoff for Russia has been the possibility of energy deals and arms sales. Trade and investment were high on the agenda during recent visits by Algerian President Boutefilka and Jordanian King Abdullah, as well as FM Lavrov's December trip to Libya (refs C and D). Yakunin has seen particular benefits, with Russian Railways winning a \$800 million contract to build a new rail line in Saudi Arabia, a \$500 million contract to modernize rail lines in Algeria, and interest from Jordan and Libya.

¶9. (C) In Southeast Asia, Russian diplomacy has been particularly focused on trade: Putin's 2007 trip to Indonesia saw the signing of contracts for Russian companies to invest \$4 billion in Indonesian energy and mining projects and an arms deal worth \$1 billion (ref E). In 2008, Russia delivered the latest consignment of Sukhoi fighters to Malaysia as part of a \$900 million contract. Russian goals were not simply economic, according to Russian and Asian diplomats, who said the GOR was also anxious to enhance political ties with Indonesia and Malaysia, two large and influential Muslim nations that helped Russian entry into the OIC.

Russia's Gain: Enhanced Security?

¶10. (C) Improved political relations with Muslim states have strengthened Russian security to a certain degree. After improving ties with the Gulf States, the GOR convinced the Saudis and Kuwaitis to stop funding Chechen separatists, while better monitoring aid that helps Russian Muslims build mosques and educational centers (ref F). Moscow has also seen Middle Eastern states embrace Chechen President Kadyrov and promise support for reconstructing his war-torn republic (ref G). Moscow analysts disagree to what extent Russia's relations with the Muslim world have also helped shield it from international Islamic extremists. Some argue that to accomplish this, Moscow significantly toned down its public support of U.S.-led anti-terrorism efforts, although Russia still supports their goals. Both Carnegie Moscow Center analyst Aleksey Malashenko and Muslim expert Ruslan Kurbanov disagreed with this assessment, and said that Islamic radicals have not forgotten Moscow's early and vocal support of American anti-terrorism measures, which, combined with Russia's repressive Caucasus policy, demonstrated to extremists Russia's "real" views on Islam.

Are Russia's Muslims a Factor?

¶11. (C) How Russia's Muslim population factors into the GOR's Islamic diplomacy remains unclear, although it most likely plays only a nominal role. Some working-level MFA officials and diplomats from Muslim countries have said that maintaining equanimity with domestic Muslims was a goal, and pointed to GOR support for increased contacts between Russia's Muslim leadership and visiting Muslim officials as evidence. However, others dismissed this idea, including Jordan Desk Officer Andrey Vavilov, who said he doubted the Kremlin thought of domestic Muslims when making foreign policy, beyond immediate implications for Chechnya. Fadi Ziadeh of the Lebanese Embassy added that Russian Muslims had little sense of solidarity with Muslims overseas, as evidenced by the lack of demonstrations by Russian Muslims against the war in Iraq or Israeli military action against Hezbollah or Hamas, which one typically saw in Muslim countries.

Domestic Implications

¶12. (C) Discerning the domestic impact of Russia's Islamic offensive was difficult, admitted Middle East expert Georgiy Mirskiy of the Institute of Higher Economics. While for typical Russian Muslims, like their Slavic/Orthodox compatriots, Russia's foreign policy is not a priority, they feel a growing "sense of solidarity" with the larger Muslim world. This trend, however, did not translate into a need to improve Russian relations with far flung Islamic states, but meant that Russia could not appear indifferent to the Muslim world, or, even worse, appear to ally itself with the "anti-Islamic West," argued Mirskiy. To avoid this problem and satisfy Russian Muslims, the GOR could point to its healthy relations with Islamic states and observer status in the OIC. RIA Novosti commentator Belenkaya took a similar view, and added that GOR "Islamic diplomacy" was meant to provide "insurance" against the growth of extremism within its own borders. Boris Makarenko of the Center for Political Technologies stressed that Russia's centralized political system precludes domestic Muslims' influence over Kremlin foreign policy, but the GOR was mindful of the reaction of Muslims to policy toward the Islamic world.

¶13. (C) Muslim expert and political affairs editor of the magazine "Smisl" Ruslan Kurbanov told us he did not believe the GOR's Islamic offensive had been effective with Russia's practicing Muslims, who viewed Russia through the prism of its violent history in the Caucasus. Kurbanov estimated that only ten percent of Russia's Muslims could be considered religious, most of whom lived in the Caucasus and were at the greatest risk of extremism. Kurbanov observed a significant "misunderstanding" between devout Russian Muslims who saw Russia as an enemy of Islam and foreigners who considered Russia an historical ally with the Arab world since the USSR era. Russia's enhanced Islamic diplomacy might appeal to foreign Muslims, but failed to persuade Russia's religious Muslims. Kurbanov believed that GOR foreign policy had little impact on secular Muslims who did not identify strongly with Muslims overseas; only domestic policies helpful to Russian Muslims would appeal to this segment of society.

Comment

¶14. (C) On balance, Russia's Islamic offensive seems to have yielded positive results for the GOR as an aspiring global actor. Russia's deepened contacts with Muslim states will allow it to play an increasing, and at times, decisive, role in regional conflicts and on the world stage.

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